



Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.17/1993/9
4 June 1993

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
First session
14-25 June 1993
Item 5 of the provisional agenda*

PROGRESS IN THE INCORPORATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE
UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT
IN THE ACTIVITIES OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, AND
MEASURES UNDERTAKEN BY THE ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE ON
COORDINATION TO ENSURE THAT SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
PRINCIPLES ARE INCORPORATED INTO PROGRAMMES AND
PROCESSES WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

Recommendations and proposals for improving coordination
of programmes related to development data that exist
within the United Nations system

Report of the Secretary-General

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* E/CN.17/1993/4.

INTRODUCTION

1. The General Assembly, in its resolution 47/191, requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Commission on Sustainable Development, at its substantive session of 1993, recommendations and proposals for improving the coordination of programmes related to development data that existed within the United Nations system, taking into account the provisions of paragraph 40.13 of Agenda 21, 1/ inter alia, regarding "Development Watch" (para. 24).

2. In paragraph 40.13 of Agenda 21, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development acknowledged that:

"Institutional capacity to integrate environment and development and to develop relevant indicators is lacking at both the national and international levels. Existing institutions and programmes such as the Global Environmental Monitoring System (GEMS) and the Global Resource Information Database (GRID) within UNEP and different entities within the system-wide Earthwatch will need to be considerably strengthened. Earthwatch has been an essential element for environment-related data. While programmes related to development data exist in a number of agencies, there is insufficient coordination between them. The activities related to development data of agencies and institutions of the United Nations system should be more effectively coordinated, perhaps through an equivalent and complementary "Development Watch", which with the existing Earthwatch should be coordinated through an appropriate office within the United Nations to ensure the full integration of environment and development concerns."

3. Although reliable information on development variables is regularly compiled and disseminated by the Statistical Division of the Secretariat, the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, among others, in a series of publications, this wealth of information is rarely taken into account during negotiations aiming at solving environmental problems. Development and environmental data should be readily available to policy makers, negotiators, decision makers and to society as a whole in support of international, national and local efforts towards sustainable development. The harmonization of existing information systems in the United Nations system could play a crucial role in the implementation of Agenda 21. Such a coordinating effort needs to be undertaken from the perspective of the needs of users at the national level. At the same time, this wealth of integrated environment and development data will be enriched by information provided by various sectors and groups of society.

4. The present report outlines current and, to the extent possible, prospective United Nations activities relevant to the recommendations of Agenda 21, as well as to the broad process of coordination under way.

5. Within the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development initial efforts will concentrate on information requested during negotiations leading to the conventions on climate change, desertification and biological diversity. Close coordination between the collection and retrieval of data from

primary sources, as well as in the presentation and dissemination of integrated environment and development data related to those processes would be essential. This exercise will be undertaken in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and other organizations concerned.

6. Part of the mandate of the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development is to provide substantive support for the monitoring of progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 and activities relating to the integration of environmental and developmental goals throughout the United Nations system and to promote an integrated treatment of sectoral and cross-sectoral issues including in particular issues relating to sustainable development. In this regard, the Department will coordinate the retrieval of information, promote active cooperation between all sources of information within and outside the United Nations system and ensure that existing information systems are strengthened.

I. "DEVELOPMENT WATCH"

7. The Inter-agency Committee on Sustainable Development, at its first session, agreed that some preliminary conceptual work would have to be carried out in view of the vast scope and complex nature of a possible "Development Watch". In response, the Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis reviewed existing mechanisms of data coordination. Socio-economic and environmental data are already coordinated to a large extent at the international level through mechanisms served by the Statistical Division of the Secretariat. Those mechanisms include, in particular, the Subcommittee on Statistical Activities of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) and the Statistical Commission.

8. The Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis proposes to further explore the concept of "Development Watch" with the help of a Task Force on Environment Statistics recently established under the aegis of the Statistical Commission. The findings of the Task Force could then be reviewed by both the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities and the Inter-agency Committee on Sustainable Development. With regard to the linkage of "Development Watch" to Earthwatch, the Statistical Division has suggested to UNEP that the examination of those links be part of cooperative efforts between UNEP and the Statistical Division, possibly under a memorandum of understanding.

9. Further activities that could be coordinated under "Development Watch" are current efforts to expand the Department's PRED database to include, besides demographic, social and economic data, environmental and natural resource variables.

II. INTEGRATED ACCOUNTING AND INDICATORS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

10. Agenda 21 includes a programme area on establishing systems for integrated environmental and economic accounting. In this programme area, the Statistical Division of the Secretariat is requested to develop and promote the methodologies of integrated accounting and to assist member States in their implementation (paras. 8.43, 8.50, 8.52).

11. The SNA Handbook on Integrated Environmental and Economic Accounting is to be issued shortly as a sales publication of the United Nations. The Statistical Division has recently carried out short-term missions to China, Indonesia and Thailand, through the United Nations regular programme for technical support, with a view to assisting the Governments of those countries in the implementation of integrated accounting. These missions may evolve into country projects, similar to case studies already carried out in Mexico and Papua New Guinea. It is intended to conduct further country projects with the possible support of UNEP and other international organizations.

12. At the regional level, the Statistical Division presented the new integrated accounting methodologies to an Organization of American States (OAS) Seminar on Natural Resource and Environmental Accounts for Development Policy (Washington, D.C., 13 and 14 April 1993). Jointly with UNDP, the Statistical Division organized a workshop on Environmental and Natural Resource Accounting for Asian and Pacific Countries (Beijing, 20-22 April 1993). Further regional seminars are planned for Africa and countries in transition in cooperation with UNDP and UNEP.

13. Agenda 21 also recommends the harmonized development of a suitable set of indicators of sustainable development by the United Nations system and other relevant international organizations and, in this context, requests the Statistical Division to pursue the development of those indicators (paras. 40.6 and 40.7).

14. Under the aegis of the Statistical Commission, the Statistical Division has recently been requested to establish a Task Force on Environment Statistics. The Task Force will, inter alia, assess the need for improved coordination in the development of environmental indicators and indicators of sustainable development. The Statistical Division will suggest the establishment of a (core) working group on such indicators to the Task Force. An expert group meeting on such indicators is proposed as part of the above-mentioned memorandum of understanding between UNEP and the Statistical Division (see para. 8 above). The Intergovernmental Working Group on the Advancement of Environment Statistics, to which the Statistical Division provides secretariat services, will continue to guide the international work on environmental statistics and indicators. In addition, complementary roles of the Technical Working Group of the former ACC Task Force on Long-term Development Objectives and the Inter-agency Working Group on Demographic Estimates and Projections could be envisaged, possibly under the proposed "Development Watch".

15. In Agenda 21, the United Nations Secretariat is requested to support, in all member States, the utilization of sustainable development indicators in national economic and social planning and decision-making practices, with a view to ensuring that integrated accounts are usefully integrated in economic development planning at the national level (para. 8.44). The use of integrated accounts in developing a National Action Plan for Sustainable Development for Papua New Guinea is currently being explored as part of an inter-agency effort of assisting the country in implementing Agenda 21 at the national level. This study could become a model for similar activities in other countries.

III. CONCLUSION

16. The Secretary-General will further inform the Commission on Sustainable Development regarding progress in improving the coordination of programmes related to development data that exist within the United Nations system and stands ready to further explore the concept of "Development Watch" on the basis of any specific proposals and recommendations of the Commission.

Notes

1/ Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992, vol. I, Resolutions Adopted by the Conference (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8), resolution 1, annex II.
